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The Workingmen's Party of the United States

The Great Strike of 1877 occurred six years after the Paris Commune—the working class–led revolution which took power in that city on March 18, 1871, and, for the seventy-two days of its existence, established a new type of state. The news of the "Revolution of March 18" produced a wave of fear throughout the established circles in both Europe and the United States. It soon became the practice to blame the social tensions in the United States on foreign influence, and this technique was employed with increasing frequency during the economic crisis of the 1870s. During the troubles on the railroads in 1873–74, there were some references to the fact that the strikers were determined to establish a Commune in the United States. But it was in the Great Strike of 1877 that a large portion of the press came to view the outbreaks as the "long-matured concerted assertion of Communism throughout the United States."[1]

This theme did not emerge immediately. Indeed, at first even those newspapers that denounced the strike still found it possible to express sympathy for the strikers. They insisted that it was impossible to equate the situation of workers, whose entire livelihood had been

threatened by the wage cuts, with that of the railroad stockholders, whose dividends may have been reduced. And they ridiculed management's defense that its salaries, too, had been cut 10 percent, along with the wages of the workingmen. As one newspaper replied:

> The officials can build palaces, the laborer can rent a hovel. The one can roll along in the bustling splendor of a four-in-hand, the other cannot hide the burnt and frost-bitten foot. These railroad authorities can afford salaries that will secure the costliest luxuries but cannot grant enough to the beggared, starving, crushed laborer and his family to meet the commonest necessities of life.[2]

Even though these newspapers urged the strikers not to resort to violence in the justifiable redress of their grievances, several added the observation that in the face of management's "arrogant impudence," violent, and even revolutionary measures might be in order. "Certainly, rebellion against lawful authority is never lawful," one paper put it, "but the principle that freed our nation from tyranny will free labor from domestic aggression."[3] The *Missouri Republican,* published in St. Louis, declared that "if the laboring men of this country must choose between revolution and abject submission to the heartless demand of capital, they will certainly not be condemned by this journal if they prefer war to starvation."[4]

But once the strike got under way, such expressions were no longer heard, and even before the great upheaval at Pittsburgh, the note of "Communism" was being injected into news and editorial columns alike. From the very outset of the strike in Martinsburg, the fear was voiced that if the "great mobs" succeeded in imposing their terms on the railroads by violence, "communism would be established in America." Thus, as early as July 19, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* warned that the strike was endangering American society, and that it had to be dealt with as if it were an "insurrection," and not just a "labor dispute":

> It is not pleasant to think of men being mowed down by soldiers, but it will be a much worse spectacle for the country to have a mob triumphant in a state like West Virginia than to have the life blown out of men who refuse to recognize the right of every American to control his own labor and his own property. This is the nearest approach we have yet had to communism in America, and if we are to be saved from the darker horrors of that system, our authorities must act with unmistakable vigor in the present emergency.[5]

The Pittsburgh massacres were viewed by the labor press as a prime example of corporate and military brutality.[6] But the commercial press unleashed a veritable barrage of editorials blaming the events of July 22 and 23 entirely on the communists. Some newspapers bluntly accused the Pittsburgh strikers of being communists (a fact which, according to the *New York Tribune*, "does not need demonstration"[7]), and reprinted the editorial in the *Pittsburgh Leader* which concluded that "the workingman in Pittsburgh is really a communist, and there is no doubt that communistic ideas have widely spread."[8] Most papers, however, insisted that it was not the strikers themselves who were responsible for the violence in Pittsburgh and other railroad centers, but rather a group of men who were neither railroad strikers nor their sympathizers. They were the "destructionists," who had been unleashed by a powerful, secret, oath-bound central organization headed by men who saw in the Great Strike a "golden opportunity to establish the Commune in the United States":

> Secret meetings of the Communists were held at which committees and sub-committees were appointed. . . . Each committee was instructed to gather from the byways and dens and the hovels these miserables to follow the direction of these blind leaders of the blind.

The labor upheaval of 1877, therefore, was "a concentrated scheme on the part of these non-working agitators" to precipi-

tate in the United States "a reign of disorder and pillage under cover of the railroad strike," which would "end in a Communist America."[9]

The "arch-conspirators" were sometimes referred to as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Knights of Labor ("probably an amalgamation of the Molly Maguires and the Commune," said one observer[10]), and more often as the "Internationalists" (the former members of the American sections of the International Workingmen's Association, the First International). But most often, the responsibility for the spread of the strike and the violence that accompanied it was placed at the doorstep of the Workingmen's Party of the United States (WPUS). According to newspaper accounts, there were party sections everywhere, and when the workers walked out, they turned to these sections for leadership: "It was said that this organization had not only money, but men with which to help the cause along." Through its sixty thousand members (the figure most commonly used), the "Communist leaders" of the Workingmen's Party took control of the uprisings, albeit behind the scenes:

> They do not appear at mass-meetings to roll out their frenzied rhetoric. . . . From the seclusion of the Star Chamber they issue their orders. . . . Like Robespierre and his brace of Fellow Conspirators, they sit in darkness and plot against the life of the nation. . . .
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> This body, the Workingmen's Party of the United States, has manipulated this labor revolution throughout the country since its inception. Every trades-union and labor organization is infected with members of the American Commune.[11]

This characterization of the force behind the Great Strike continued to appear in the books published soon after the labor uprising. Allan Pinkerton, basing his conclusion on reports that he said had come from agents of his detective agency throughout the country, maintained that the Great Strike was the "direct result" of the

activities of the Workingmen's Party of the United States. "On every railroad that was held by lawless men, in every city where violence reigned, . . . this accursed thing came to the surface," Pinkerton wrote in 1878. "If its members did not actually inaugurate the strikes, the strikes were the direct result of the communistic spirit spread through the ranks of railroad employes by communistic leaders and their teachings."[12] Joseph A. Dacus, another contemporary historian of the Great Strike, subscribed to the same idea:

> Taking advantage of the strikes of the railroad men, the "Workingmen's Party of the United States" suddenly revealed itself in almost every city in the Union, not only as an element in the general disturbance, but as the prompting power in all the movements made subsequent to the transfer of the seat of the trouble from Martinsburg to the larger centers of population.[13]

This tendency to view the Great Strike as the handiwork of the Workingmen's Party of the United States persisted until at least 1937, when Ellis Paxton Oberholtzer, in the fourth volume of his *History of the United States Since the Civil War,* attributed the labor uprising to the "various agents" of the party. "Never before," he wrote, "had its hand been so clearly seen."[14]

Apart from their sinister implications, these comments about a party that was just celebrating its first birthday certainly gave it credit for an enormous amount of power and influence. But one must separate fact from fantasy in dealing with the actual role of the Workingmen's Party in the Great Strike.

The Workingmen's Party of the United States was born at a congress held in Philadelphia from July 19 to 23, 1876. It was the second Marxist party established in any country, the first having been set up in Germany in 1875. Like the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the Workingmen's Party of the United States was the result of a merger of two socialist groups—the disciples of Karl Marx and the followers of Ferdinand Lassalle.

For over a decade before the formation of the Workingmen's Party of the United States, the Marxists, led by Friedrich A. Sorge, had made their influence felt through the American sections of the International Workingmen's Association. Through the International, they had sought to build a trade union movement that would provide the foundation for a socialist political movement and, at the same time, unite the German and other foreign-born workers with American workers in a joint struggle to improve the conditions of the working class and pave the way for a new social system.[15]

Between 1869, when Section 1 was founded in New York City, and 1871, a number of sections were organized with a total membership of five thousand. Most of them were German, but there were also Irish, Bohemian, French (exiled victims of the recently crushed Paris Commune), and American sections. The International, however, was seriously weakened by internal dissension. For one thing, middle class reformers took over Section 12 in New York City, and a struggle broke out between these elements and the Marxists. For another, the Lassallean influence began to make itself felt in the various sections, and they also came into conflict with the Marxists.

In keeping with Lassalle's ideas, his followers in the United States argued that it was impossible for workers, under capitalism, to raise their wages above the bare minimum necessary to sustain life, and that the only way for them to escape from poverty and bondage was by establishing their own cooperative enterprises and using the ballot to obtain state aid for these cooperatives. The Lassalleans entered the trade unions and sought to convert them from organizations devoted to the struggle for higher wages, shorter hours, and other improvements in the lives of workers into associations concentrating on cooperatives and on state aid to labor through the issuance of greenbacks.

The Marxists fought both the middle class reformers and the Lassalleans in the American sections of the International. In 1872, Section 12 and other American sections that were dominated by middle class reformers were expelled by the General Council in

London. That same year, the headquarters of the International was moved from London to New York as Marx sought to prevent the Anarchists from taking it over. Sorge was entrusted with the responsibility for maintaining the organization until such time as it could be returned to its place of origin.[16]

Under Sorge's leadership, the Marxists in the International combatted the Lassallean effort to convert the trade unions into purely political bodies. In this, they were guided by Marx through his correspondence with their leaders. The "final object" of the workers' movement, Marx emphasized in letters to his American disciples,[17] was the "conquest of political power," but such an accomplishment required "a previous organization of the working class developed up to a certain point, which itself arises from its economic struggles." For this reason, both the "purely economic movement" of the workers (trade union efforts to force concessions directly from particular employers through strikes) and the "political movement" (such as efforts to achieve an eight-hour law) merited support, because both were "a means of developing this organization."[18]

The economic crisis of 1873 served to intensify the internal dissension within the International. While it gained prestige as the organizing center for the struggles of the unemployed, it is also true that the crisis tended to strengthen the position of the Lassalleans. Events seemed to reinforce their argument that trade unions, strikes, and unemployed demonstrations were useless, and that the only instrument for "lifting the yoke of capital" from labor was the ballot.[19]

The Marxists did not reject political action; in fact, they believed that every class struggle was a political struggle. But they held that the time was not yet ripe for the formation of a workers' party that would be strong enough to influence the elections. The trade unions, they contended, were the cradle of the labor movement, and it was the duty of the American sections of the International to both revive existing trade unions and to help in the organization of new ones. Unemployed demonstrations, far from being useless, helped secure relief for homeless and hungry families, stimulated workers

to think along socialist lines, and presented opportunities to bring home to workers the message that only under socialism would exploitation of the masses cease.[20]

But the Lassalleans were confident that the situation was propitious for them to carry their policies into effect. In 1874, they left the International and established the Workingmen's Party of Illinois in the West, and the Social-Democratic Workingmen's Party of North America in the East. By February 1874, the Workingmen's Party of Illinois was publishing a weekly organ in German, *Vorbote*, edited by the Lassallean, Karl Klinge. *Vorbote* placed great stress on the fundamental Lassallean demand—state aid to cooperative societies. In keeping with Lassallean principles, it announced that the Workingmen's Party would have nothing to do with trade unionism, since "it never led to any lasting betterment for the workingmen in the several trades."[21]

The Social-Democratic Workingmen's Party of North America likewise emphasized that its object was to take "possession of political power as a prerequisite for the solution of the labor question." But within it were a number of Marxists, who constantly stressed the importance of combining trade union and political activities. As a result of their influence, the party gradually approached the ideas of the International.[22]

Events themselves also operated to heal the split between the Lassalleans and the Marxists. The Workingmen's Party of Illinois met with complete failure at the ballot-box in the 1874 elections, thereby vindicating the Marxist contention that premature political action was futile if the workers were not organized into trade unions. Applying the lessons of this experience, the advocates of trade union action in the Social-Democratic Workingmen's Party were able to increase their influence. At a party convention in 1875, a resolution was adopted asserting that "under the present conditions the organization of working people into trade unions is indispensable, and that each party member is obliged to become a member of the union of his trade, or to aid in establishing a trade union where none exists." The *Socialist*, English organ of the Social-Democratic Work-

ingmen's Party, published in New York City, hailed the resolution and called for "the defense of the trade unions and their principles upon every occasion, in order that the reorganization of society may be speedily accomplished."[23]

In Germany, meanwhile, a reconciliation had been achieved by the Lassalleans and Marxists. At the famous Gotha Congress of 1875, they finally worked out a program acceptable to both groups. While Marx, in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme,* criticized the concessions made to the Lassalleans, the Social Democratic Party that emerged from the unity congress was primarily Marxist in orientation. The German example influenced socialists in the United States, and by the fall of 1875 socialist unity was the predominant issue in both Marxist and Lassallean circles.[24]

On April 16, 1876, at a convention held in Pittsburgh, the first real steps were taken to achieve that goal. Although it was sponsored by the Social-Democratic Workingmen's Party, it was attended by socialists of all tendencies, and out of the gathering emerged a "Declaration of Unity" which proposed a unified movement to be called the "Socialist Labor Party of the United States of North America."

The "Declaration of Unity" issued a call for a unity congress to be held in Philadelphia toward the end of July 1876, to which the Social Democratic Workingmen's Party, the International Workingmen's Association, the Workingmen's Party of Illinois, and the Social Political Laborers' Union of Cincinnati would each send one delegate for every five hundred paying members in good standing. "Immediately after the completion of the labors of said congress," the call went on, "all the societies therein represented shall enter the newly organized party."[25]

First to arrive in Philadelphia were ten delegates representing the American sections of the International Workingmen's Association. They came on July 15, 1876, and in less than a day the delegates had dissolved the once-powerful International and entrusted its archives and documents to Sorge and Karl Speyer.[26]

On July 19, the unity congress opened in Philadelphia. Seven

societies sent delegates, but only four of them were considered in good standing and entitled to representation. Seven delegates were accepted: Sorge and Otto Weydemeyer from the International; Conrad A. Conzett from the Workingmen's Party of Illinois; Charles Braun from the Social Political Workingmen's Society of Cincinnati; and Adolph Strasser, Adolph Gabriel, and Peter J. McGuire from the Social Democratic Workingmen's Party of North America. These seven delegates represented approximately three thousand organized socialists in the United States—635 in the International, 593 in the Workingmen's Party of Illinois, 250 in the Social Political Workingmen's Society of Cincinnati, and 1,500 in the Social Democratic Workingmen's Party of North America.

The unity congress lasted four days and established a united socialist party, called the Workingmen's Party of the United States. (The word *socialist* in the name had been objected to in preconvention discussion on the ground that it would frighten English-speaking workers, but one commentator observed shrewdly: "In any case, we will be called communists regardless of what name we adopt,"[27] which proved to be an accurate prediction.) The platform was the result of a compromise. It adopted the trade union policies of the International, but conceded to the Lassallean request that a national instead of an international organization be established. On the key issues of political action and trade unionism, the platform said:

> The political action of the party is confined generally to obtaining legislative acts in the interest of the working class proper. It will not enter into a political campaign before being strong enough to exercise a perceptible influence, and then in the first place locally in the towns or cities, when demands of purely local character may be presented, providing they are not in conflict with the platform and principles of the party.
>
> We work for the organization of trades unions upon a national and international basis to ameliorate the condition of the working people and seek to spread therein the above principles.

The National Executive Committee, which was based in Chicago, was dominated by the Lassalleans. A further concession was made to the Lassalleans in a resolution put forward by McGuire and opposed by Sorge, Strasser, Weydemeyer, and Conzett. It empowered the executive committee to allow local sections to enter political campaigns when circumstances were considered favorable. Again over the objection of the Marxists, the platform endorsed the Lassallean principle of governmental transfer of industrial enterprises to producers' cooperatives.

The *Vorbote* in Chicago and the *Sozial-Demokrat* in New York were designated as official organs, with the latter's name being changed to *Arbeiter-Stimme.* The English-language organ of the Social Democratic Workingmen's Party of North America was also declared an official organ. Its name was changed to *Labor Standard,* and J.P. McDonnell, a Marxist, was selected as editor.

Neither the united party's Declaration of Principles nor any of the eleven specific measures proposed "as a means to improve the condition of the working class" dealt with Black Americans,[28] but a resolution was adopted dealing with women's rights. It acknowledged the "perfect equality of rights of both sexes," but said nothing about women's political rights. Instead, it emphasized that "the emancipation of women will be accomplished with the emancipation of men, and the so-called women's rights question will be solved with the labor question."[29]

By the time the unity congress closed on July 22, 1876, a unified socialist party, Marxist in orientation, had come into existence in the United States for the first time. In order not to endanger this unity, the congress made no provision for a referendum vote on the actions taken there, and the Workingmen's Party of the United States began functioning immediately. Its existence was noted in the *New York Times* of August 11, 1876, which began the process of exaggerating its strength by stating that the new party "now numbers over fifty thousand members."

It is likely that the organization had less than three thousand members at the time of its founding. But whatever its size, by the

first week in August the Workingmen's Party of the United States was a functioning organization, and the *Labor Standard* expressed optimism that as its principles became known, more and more workingmen would be "falling into the ranks of the Workingmen's Party."[30]

For several months after the unity congress, the Marxists seemed confident that the opposition to trade unionism in socialist ranks had been more or less laid to rest, and that the time was ripe for a drive to bring the workers into the trade unions. The disastrous decline in membership that the unions had suffered since 1873 made the need for organizing drives more urgent than ever, and the Marxists were convinced that the Workingmen's Party of the United States had to spearhead these campaigns.[31] At a meeting of the New York American section of the party in October 1876, the Marxists, lead by J.P. McDonnell, joined forces with Adolph Strasser and several other former members of the Social Democratic Workingmen's Party of North America to adopt a resolution which read:

> Whereas trade unions are organized for the protection of the working classes against the rapacity of the employing class.
>
> Be it resolved—That we recognize the Trade Unions as a great lever by which the working class will be economically emancipated, and we consider it the duty of all the members of the W.P.U.S. to support and promote their Trade Unions.
>
> Be it further resolved that the organization of Trade Unions on a national as well as international basis is highly desirable.[32]

The former Internationalists and their supporters saw trade unionism as a necessary prelude to working class politics and expected the new party to pursue this course in accordance with the platform and principles adopted at the founding congress. But the Lassalleans, who preached political action first and foremost, were determined to ignore and eventually revise the mandate of the unity congress that political campaigns be organized only when the party was "strong enough to exercise a perceptible influence." As early as

September 1876, they won an important victory when the Lassallean-dominated National Executive Committee granted the New Haven section the right to engage in electoral campaigns. With the encouragement of the executive committee, New Haven nominated a ticket in the fall election of 1876, and was speedily followed by sections in Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and Chicago—all in defiance of the official platform. When the electoral results showed that the socialist candidates in New Haven, Chicago, and Cincinnati had gained large votes, and that six socialists had been elected in Milwaukee, the Lassalleans were more determined than ever to ignore the official regulations.[33] Indeed, Peter J. McGuire, their leader, insisted that as long as the depression continued, it was pointless to try to organize the workers into trade unions or for any other type of economic activity: "As long as the times are such that the majority of the people can just barely live they will suffer on."[34]

Thus, on the eve of the great social explosion that was to disprove McGuire's thesis, the Workingmen's Party of the United States was being torn apart by the conflict between the "trade union" and "political action" socialists. In an article published in the early 1890s in *Die Neue Zeit,* the theoretical journal of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Sorge noted that while the unity congress united the socialist movement, "no real unity reigned among the disparate elements, that is no unity which was based on conformity of principles and tactics, and thus disagreements soon broke out again."[35]

Preoccupied with internal issues, the socialists in the Workingmen's Party of the United States played no part in instigating the Great Strike. After studying the manuscript minutes of the Hoboken and Philadelphia sections, Robert V. Bruce concludes that "the members . . . showed not the slightest advance knowledge of the great labor uprising."[36] The same can be said for every other section. Certainly, the newly organized party had had little contact with railroad workers during its first year of existence. In the summer of 1876, the Cincinnati section had adopted resolutions condemning the labor policies of the Ohio & Mississippi Railroad, whose workers were on strike, and had urged the revocation of its charter. The

section had forwarded the resolutions to the strikers, but after the Lassalleans took control, it became so involved in political campaigning that it failed to follow up these contacts. When the great upheaval of 1877 started, only one member of the Workingmen's Party appears to have had any close contacts with the railroad workers—Harry Eastman, a machinist in East St. Louis.[37]

Nevertheless, as we shall now see, once the strikes got under way, the Workingmen's Party of the United States did become deeply involved in the titanic struggle, and in at least one key center, took over its leadership.[38]